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ABSTRACT

The common thread that runs through the activities in a literacy course for undergraduate preservice teachers is text. One such activity is a literacy autobiography in which students focus on themselves as learners and teachers. Students are treated as professionals and make their own decisions about how they want to present themselves to their colleagues and their friends in the professional community. Among the students interest is broad and intense. Once completed, the literacy autobiographies are read aloud in small groups, discussed, and written about in students' journals. The commonalities and differences cultivate a discussion of readers and writers and how they got that way. Two other activities are professional development groups and "kidwatching." Each group of students reads one of the supplementary texts for the course and develops a presentation of the text for the whole class. To understand kidwatching, the students start by watching each other. A few students come to the center of the classroom and think and talk out loud as they prepare egg foo young using a wok--an elaborate and complex text that the instructor and students struggle to explain to each other. Texts such as these can be viewed as concentric rings which have spaces in them that allow the flow and overflow of learning to occur. (A figure illustrating concentric rings of texts is included; five references, the four required texts for the course, and the 11 supplemental texts for the course are attached.) (RS)

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Texts, Contexts, and Growth: Activity in a Community

Richard J. Meyer

Learners Involved and Setting

I'd like to describe a few of the activities in which my undergraduate students engage in the literacy courses I teach. I believe that the activities overlap, so rather than describe one, I will present a few as part of the continuing journey in our growth together. The common thread of all these activities is text. My students probably grow weary of how often I refer to texts and the various types of texts to which I refer. It is my hope that my fascination with text and context will penetrate their classrooms as they enter student teaching and then teaching.

Many publishers offer us basal readers for our undergraduate courses, but I have stopped using them. The students are often overwhelmed on the first day of class if they have visited the bookstore prior to arriving at class because I order four required texts and eleven supplemental texts (listed at the end of this piece). The bookstore insists on calling these optional, but I list them as supplemental on the syllabus.

Building A Community of Readers and Writers

We read Graves' (1990) *Discover Your Own Literacy* first. The students are typically surprised at how easy a read this book is and embark upon lengthy discussions of all the obstacles to their own literacy. Many discuss having been avid readers as young children but upon entering high school, and later the university, they found they have no time to be readers and writers. I point out that they

are reading and writing for their courses but they discount this because it is not of their own choosing. Some insist that ownership is married to self-selection and that their own literacy is private, not something imposed by a professor.

Other students admit that they do not consider themselves literate at all. They are not readers and writers because reading and writing are not now nor have they ever been pleasurable experiences. Reading and writing are viewed as tools which must be used for one to gain some other goal, such as a well-paying job or prestige.

The Literacy Autobiography

Rather than cultivate discussion about personal literacy practice at this point in time, I assign the students a research project. Their faces drop, seemingly deceived by my interest in their growth as individuals, until they hear that the focus of the project is themselves and their own literacy. We brainstorm a list of resources about our own literacy. Someone suggests that each individual is her or his own best resource about her or his own literacy development. Others point out that teachers, parents, siblings, friends, family members, and other significant and primary caretakers are also good sources. We discuss the types of questions one might ask herself or himself or others about one's own literacy development. The students use the texts of their own lives as the point of origin for their study of literacy development, processes, and instruction.

I give the students copies of the Burke interview (in Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987) and the surveys Nancie Atwell (1987) provides in *In the Middle* and we talk about the questions. I give the

students some time in class to start to write about their earliest recollections of their own literacy. Each piece of the past seems to generate new questions: Who did you write notes to? Why? Do you remember the first thing you wrote or read? What was your favorite book? What were your family's reading habits? Did you get read to each night? If so, by whom?

We write for a while during class and meet in small groups to discuss what we wrote, generate more questions, and continue to grow as a community of inquirers. Then I ask the students about other questions which come to mind. I ask them to keep a list of any new questions they have about becoming literate so that they can share the questions with class members. I give the students two to three weeks to complete their literacy autobiographies. My goal is for them to focus on themselves as learners and teachers. I tell them what Geane Hanson (personal communication) has impressed upon me: You are who you teach and you teach who you are. My goal, which I make public, is to have the students follow some of the threads of the text of their literacy growth and development and commit those to a written text.

All of the questions which you can imagine now surface: How long does it have to be? Does it need to be typed? Does neatness count (usually asked by someone with a perceptive sense of humor, or me)? Can it be handed in late? And on and on and on. I listen to all the questions first. Then we do a little exercise which is quite melodramatic, but which I use to drive home a point. When the flow of questions has subsided, I ask the students to take out a piece of scrap paper and rip it in half. As I usually do with a writing

exercise, I tell them whether or not it will be collected or read by others, aloud etc. It will be completely private. On one piece of paper, I ask the students to write the words "student number" and then to write that number. On the other sheet, I ask them to write their social security number. Someone usually points out that they are identical. Then I ask them to make a decision some time before the next class.

"Take your student number," I say, "and tear it up and throw it away. From now on, I consider all of you to be professional preservice teachers, not students who are separated from the profession. You may not have your own classroom at this time, so you might call yourself preservice teachers, but I consider you professionals. I won't answer questions about the autobiography if they are questions which I believe a professional teacher could answer for herself or himself. You make the decisions you need to make about how you will present yourself to your colleagues and your friends and me, as a member of this professional community."

Oh, how they hate this. I remind them of it quite frequently throughout the beginning of the semester until we reach the point at which they are reminding each other and me that they are professionals and will make decisions for themselves.

The spectrum of interest and intensity of the research never ceases to amaze me. Some take the Burke interview or Atwell's surveys and respond to those questions just as they were written, as though it was an exam. Others type up elaborate recollections of horror stories and/or fond memories about their growth as readers and writers. Others have done this and more. They have taken the

job of researcher quite literally and enjoyed doing primary research as opposed to the type of work they have previously completed in the library. These preservice teachers interviewed their parents over the phone or visited home for a weekend to interview. Some called their grandparents to ask about the family's literacy history in English as well as other languages. Some went home and rummaged through basements, closets, garages, and attics to find artifacts as evidence of the way they came to be readers and writers. Sadly, some of the class members were genuinely disappointed to find that their parents had not saved every worksheet and painting from their first years of school, especially when they have classmates whose parents had saved these precious relics.

The 'due date' for this project turns into an incredible community builder for the class. I have them move into small groups and read their literacy autobiographies (text) exactly as they wrote them. For many, this is a surprise because they have rarely (if ever) read their own writing out loud. I ask them to read their work verbatim in order for others in their small group to hear how their colleagues write. After an individual has read, the 'rules' are less strict and I encourage them to engage in conversation about what has been read. The class members take their journals to the autobiography readings so that they can make notes about other recollections which occur to them while a colleague is reading. Many write and I hear cries of, "Me too." "I wonder why I didn't think of that when I wrote mine." "That happened to me, too." I have written my literacy autobiography and I share it in a small group, too.

We share our written texts and the historical texts some have brought from home (some were sent express mail). We see worksheets, workbooks, those purple sheets, black line copies, and that writing paper with chunks of wood in it which are large enough for small campfires. The preservice teachers read to each other from pages which they have written ten or more years ago. Some bring in high school newspapers and yearbooks in which they had articles or poems published.

The commonalties and the differences cultivate a rich discussion of who we are as readers and writers and how we got that way. Values about reading and writing become salient. One woman, who grew up on a farm, expressed concern that colleagues raised their eyebrows when she said that her parents never read to her. She explained that there was always work to do on the farm and her parents were quite exhausted by the end of a day.

My job becomes one of helping preservice teachers trace their attitudes and beliefs about literacy back to their past and forward to their own classrooms, memories and places rich in text and context. I ask, "What are the implications here for your own classroom?"

"Why would someone who hates reading want to become a teacher?"

"Can you teach writing and reading if you hate to write and read?"

"Can you teach if you are not a learner?"

Of course, we have read Graves (1990) so my beliefs are clear and they are also clearly challenged. Some class members wonder

how they can read and, especially, write when there is just no time. So we discuss time. And responsibilities. And children. And more. The details of these discussion vary from class to class. I find myself doing a lot of listening and working with the preservice teachers to make sense, together, of what it means to be literate.

Professional Development Groups

The learnings from the literacy autobiographies return to us throughout the semester. Preservice teachers find out things about themselves, the texts of their lives, as they discover who they are as literate beings. They share joys and sorrows, challenges and points of excitement. They find that the more they study themselves and who they are as readers and writers, the more they can see in children. And that learning serves as a segue for me to have them read in two other texts.

First, I do book talks about the supplementary texts for the class. I show them the books and talk about the contents and the authors. I explain that we will be reading in professional development groups for the next few weeks. Each group will read one of the supplemental texts together and meet for at least thirty minutes during each class session to discuss what they have read, to plan what and how much to read next, and to plan for a way to share their learning with the other groups who are reading different texts. Not surprisingly, the preservice teachers choose books which their fraternity or sorority brothers and sisters choose, or their friends choose, or books which seem to be easy reads. I discuss this response in terms of text and context, personal histories, the nature of our relationships, and the social contexts of learning.

The exciting thing about teaching this way is that the books are so good that once they begin reading them, they are quite hooked and typically comment that these texts are not like the texts they are using in their other 'methods' courses. As each group meets, they are often surprised at my role. I visit each group to discuss their progress, but often suggest things they have not thought to do as readers. We look at the appendices (and Atwell certainly has the best I've seen), the chapter length, the table of contents, and how the book is laid out. I ask them if they plan on reading the book in the order the author wrote it. This question surprises some folks and intrigues others as they decide to 'skip around' because one chapter in particular seems quite interesting. Later on I might ask if they intend to finish the book. We discuss criteria for abandoning a book and I leave the decision making up to the individual group.

The presentations are fascinating as each group struggles to do something which will involve and interest their colleagues. We discuss possibilities for presenting during one class and there is quite a bit of silence as groups know how cumbersome group presentations can be. I suggest that we present more like *Where the Wild Things Are* than *Fun With Dick and Jane*. We've had puppet plays, a day full of centers, cooking activities, role playing, and more. One class decided to use an ambassador program[1] rather than formal presentations. Each group split up so that members of the groups were shuffled around the class. Then each new group engaged in discussions about facets of literacy growth, development, and

[1]Thanks to Nancy Welch, a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, for the idea of using the term 'ambassador' for this activity.

instruction which were presented in their books. The discussion was lively and interesting. We had a whole group discussion to 'process' the small group conversations and, predictably, I talked about intertextuality as they discussed commonalties and differences across texts.

Of course, I discuss texts throughout our journey in the professional development groups. I talk about the text of the book, the texts of our understandings, the texts of the discussion, and the texts of their journals as places to respond, think, and wonder. I also talk about text being impossible without a context--we frequently discuss the conditions under which we are learning and growing.

Kidwatching

A second issue to emerge from the autobiographies is typically assessment and it is at this point that we read about kidwatching (Goodman, 1985), which I interpret in terms of texts and context. We teach in area elementary schools as part of the course, but that is not the focus of this particular section. In order to understand kidwatching, we start by watching each other because we can have many levels of conversation going on at once. Three or four class members volunteer to come to the center of a circle in the classroom. On the table at the center of the circle is a wok, an electric hot plate, and the ingredients and the recipe for egg foo yung. This is a unique experience for the preservice teachers in my classes because many come from small midwestern towns and have not previously cooked with a wok. This is not meant as a

condemnation, it merely adds to the interest and language of this event.

The cooks are encouraged to talk and think out loud as the rest of the class is kidwatching. The cooks are quite intent on following the recipe and having an edible result in the end. Their discussion is rich in the 'stuff' of classrooms in which language is cultivated and explored. I watch, of course, and work with the kidwatchers, peeking into their notebooks as they write about what they are seeing and hearing. As we begin to eat the first few egg foo yung, we realize that the conversation has changed. Once the jobs are divided and decisions are made, the cooks become efficient and, with that, become quite confident and some times even silly. This adds to the kidwatching experience as we discuss what takes place and changes over time. I lead the class through Halliday's (1975) field, tenor, and mode to interpret what we are seeing. We discuss the relationships between the cooks and the cooks join in the discussion as they share what they were thinking and feeling. It is an elaborate and complex text which we struggle to explain to each other in order to understand it, as well as to justify the activity of cooking. Discussion also provides insights into language use (text) as a window into understanding and an indicator of the authenticity of a learning activity.

Art Salz, a professor I had when I was a student over twenty years ago at Queens College, told me that if you can eat a lesson, it's a good lesson. We share our egg foo yung and we talk about the experience. When the clean up is complete and we are all seated in the circle again, I once again talk about text, context, and

community. We have changed having eaten together. We share 'inside' jokes about egg shells, Michele and her distaste of mushrooms, and other community things. These are important texts for us to understand because of how they impact the literacy of our classroom. We end the day by writing in our journals. Some folks leave as the class time ends; others stay and write and write and write. That text, too, will also be discussed at our next class.

Genuine Activity versus Dogma

As with any description of engagement or demonstration, my concern is that the foundation of the activity will be lost and that it will be reduced to dogmatic practice. Therefore, I include this brief discussion of my orientation to my classroom activity. I believe that learning starts with the self, so the learners in my classes focus on themselves to begin with. Learning begins with the learner and we are all learners in the class. The study of self, with the help of Graves (1990), overflows into a sharing session during which literacy autobiographies are presented and discussed. The study of the self leads to the risk of presenting that self to others. That risk typically results in a positive experience, so we have built more foundation for risk. We venture into professional development groups which are embarked upon with individuals the members of the class choose.

The professional development groups sometimes disperse into a second round of readings if we have time. Otherwise, they remain intact for the semester, depending on time and individuals' choices. The feelings within the group support us as we venture forth to learning new things, be that about how to make egg foo yung, how to

build a geodesic dome, and on and on. We explore our own learning as we explore how it is we learn, what we choose to learn, and the conditions which most support and facilitate our learning. The texts of these explorations are the oral and written texts of the class. I have come to view these texts as concentric rings which have spaces in them that allow the flow and overflow of learning to occur (Figure 1). My ultimate obligation is to help in the building of an environment which cultivates the opening of the spaces so that the self, small groups, and the large group can learn, grow, take risks, and mutually explore our literate lives and the lives of the students we touch.

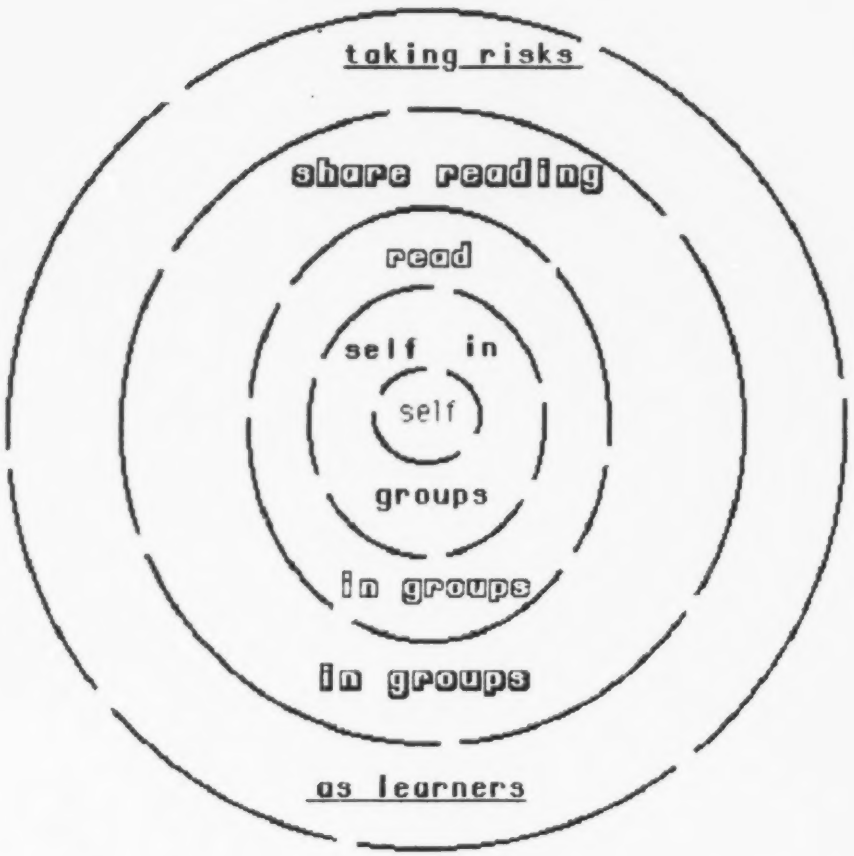

Figure 1. Concentric rings of texts which are identified and studied as a community of learners. (Read each font/style within its particular ring: self, **self in groups**, read in groups, **share reading in groups**, taking risks as learners.)

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